

## Big Dogs, Little People

New show on Animal Planet aims to dispel stereotypes of pit bulls, short-statured folk

BY JIM BAKER

**Animal rescue reality shows** are nothing new. *Animal Cops* and *Animal Precinct* have been popular staples of Animal Planet programming for years now.

And last fall saw the addition of two new entries in this category: National Geographic Channel's *Rescue Ink*, about a bunch of heavily tattooed bikers whose mission is to protect abused animals in the New York City area (profiled in *Animal Sheltering* in Nov-Dec 2008); and *Pit Bulls and Parolees*, in which a top pit bull trainer pairs dogs from her rescue with half a dozen ex-convicts on parole, "to provide both man and man's best friend a chance at redemption," according to the show's website.

But Shorty Rossi is convinced that his animal rescue reality show—*Pit Boss*, which premiered Jan. 16 on the Discovery Channel's Animal Planet—represents a new wrinkle in the genre, offering viewers something new and different.

And just what, exactly, would that be?

"You don't every day see little people running down the street chasing a pit bull," says Rossi, the program's star.



*Pit Boss* follows the lives of Shorty Rossi and three of his friends/employees as they strive to counter stereotypes that society has about pit bulls—and little people like themselves.



Shorty Rossi, owner of a Hollywood talent management company for little people and founder of Shorty's Rescue, a group devoted to stray and homeless pit bulls, is the star of Animal Planet's *Pit Boss*, a new animal rescue reality show based in Los Angeles.

The show follows the lives of Rossi, a little person himself, and three of his friends/employees in their jobs at Shortywood Productions, Rossi's Hollywood talent management company for little people, as well as their work rescuing, rehabbing, and training pit bulls through Shorty's Rescue.

The program might sound like a gimmick thrown together by a producer—it is reality TV, after all. But Rossi's longstanding love for animals, and his advocacy on behalf of pit bulls, is real. He's constantly fielding calls from people who ask him to take in unwanted or abused dogs, and his rescue has a foster network of homes to care for them.

Why pit bulls? "Well, they're a misunderstood breed, and so are little people misunderstood at the same time. I had my first pit bull in the 1980s, and I never left them," he says.

Rossi lives in Venice, Calif., where his company and rescue are based. He shares his home with five pit bulls, three of whom he has trained to work in entertainment. One of the pit bulls, Hercules, serves as his service dog and is his constant companion, as Rossi suffers from back problems.

There's lots of overlap between Rossi's own dogs and his talent management company. He gets them involved in many of the same gigs—films, commercials, industry/corporate events, and private parties—where his clients have been hired to work.

"We take our dogs to events. For example, when we have little people [working] as elves, we have Hercules as a reindeer," Rossi says. "When little people were dressed up as crawfish, we dressed up Hercules as a lobster." **AS**